

Mr. Johnson, all the way back."

Had it not been for her words and touch, he would not have made it out the door. As it was, he was almost jaunty behind the cart as he and Juanita crossed the parking lot. Juanita got him settled in his seat and she went back inside the store and gave that girl a hard hug. When she got back to the car, Clete was sleeping like a baby.

ANDY WARHOL BLUES, Part 2

Benito Santiago, catcher for the San Diego Padres, smacked the first pitch of the seventh inning foul on the third base side. Ellis Leahy, sitting seven rows behind the dugout, jumped up, stretched tall, and snatched it out of its intended trajectory. The impact of the ball on his palm pulled his arm and shoulder back, altering his center of gravity enough to cause him to topple over his armrest and into the lap of the guy sitting next to him....

That guy was Clete Johnson, Ellis' next door neighbor. Clete was recovering from a stroke. He had quad-caned into the stadium from the handicapped parking space and settled in to watch the game. Ellis made the beer and hot dog runs.

Ellis fell into Clete's lap, crushing the three-quarters-full paper beer cup. The amber fluid dribbled down onto the cold, hard cement as Ellis held the ball aloft for the television camera. Clete grinned a lopsided grin and tried to mouth the words, "Hi, Juanita," to his wife who was watching the game at home.

GEOMETRY

The first post-stroke sentence that Clete uttered — and it seemed to have flitted in out of nowhere, out of the mishmash of random nouns he had managed to master — was this: "The cut on a grapefruit should be equatorial, not longitudinal." And he held up the mis-sliced fruit for the waitress to inspect.

Delores, the waitress, unaware of the importance and the accomplishment of that sentence, plucked the yellow fruit from his hand and said, "Yeah, O.K. I'll go getcha a new one."

When Clete's buddy Ellis returned from the bathroom he said, "Hey, I thought you had a grapefruit. You finish it already?" Clete struggled with the words bouncing around

inside his brain, but all he could come up with was, "Grapefruit." The sentence had broken up into separate words that refused to string themselves together again.

Back in the kitchen, Dolores sliced a new grapefruit, an equatorial slice this time. She didn't bother Bill the cook. He was hungover and as grouchy as a sleepy bear. A request for a re-order might just result in a homicide.

Dolores brought out the new fruit and set it down in front of Clete. "There you go," she said. "We're talkin' equatorial this time." To make up for the initial mistake, and to ensure herself a good tip, she had made the cut a bit higher than the equator, giving Clete a good two-thirds of the globe. Clete grinned and nodded at her, and Ellis reached across the table and lifted the grapefruit out of its bowl for an inspection. "Equator's down here," he said, pointing to an imaginary line in the middle of the fruit. "This looks more like maybe the thirty-fifth parallel, sweetie. Don't you know nothin' about geometry?"

WALKIN'

Clete's recovery was going so well — he had graduated from walker to quad-cane to regular cane — that Ellis decided to take him out to the mall to buy him some walking shoes. They found a nice pair on sale at Sears for \$14.99, bought them, and went out to grab a couple of cups of gourmet coffee from the Exotic Coffee Stop. Four incredibly expensive cookies from Mrs. Chips rounded out the repast, and Ellis found them a spot on the edge of the brick planter box and he and Clete sat and munched and sipped and watched the pretty ladies walk by.

Clete's bad foot began to drag a bit on the way back to the car, but he made it, no sweat. He did so well that at times he eschewed the aid of the cane, lifting it and grasping it at mid-point to carry it at his side in the horizontal position. He would have twirled it like a baton had he known how.

They ran into Corinne, the lady who ran the snack bar down at the Loma Alta Lanes, out in the parking lot. She was climbing out of the driver's seat of her Datsun when Ellis slid between his car and hers and began to talk some shit to her. He had had the hots for her for what seemed like forever. She wasn't interested but she enjoyed the game; she smiled and laughed and let Ellis make a fool of himself, winking at Clete over the roof of her car. Ellis' suave, man-of-the-world facade blinked off when he leaned his hand against his sun-broiled fender. The ozone-depleted atmosphere had allowed enough solar radiation